Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled - Part 6 - Wilding Graft

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Chronicles of Heaven Unshackled *is a lightly edited version of Pete Lowman's doctoral thesis. Links to each part will be enabled as they are published.*

[Part 7: A Few Conclusions]

Part 6. SUPERNATURALISTIC REALISM: JACK CLEMO'S 'WILDING GRAFT'

We have considered a number of novels that attempt to depict providentialism by means of fantasy. In contrast, there are very few realistic modern novels which have attempted to portray the operation of grace in this world. In *Fictional Absence*, the companion study to this, we have given some attention to Graham Greene's work, and, more briefly, to that of Evelyn Waugh; another very interesting example, much less well known but valuable to set alongside Lewis and Tolkien's work, is *Wilding Graft* by Jack Clemo. [1]

Set in the claymining country of Cornwall during the second world war, *Wilding Graft* turns on two characters, Garth Joslin and Griffiths. At the beginning of the book, Garth has just returned from his mother's funeral. His relationship with his fiancee, a somewhat frigid and ill-matched girl named Edith, has been disintegrating as his mother's mental illness has developed, and has finally terminated – along with Garth's good reputation in the area – after a flirtation with Irma Stribley, a London girl on a brief visit to relatives in Cornwall. Garth's mother, mentally broken from nursing her husband's final illness, has attempted suicide at the time of Edith's marriage to someone else, and has spent the closing four years of her life in Bodmin mental asylum. Garth himself is much damaged by all of this, but being of an (unconventionally) Christian cast of mind he concludes that there must be some divine plan working itself out through all that has happened, and determines to wait for it to become plain: specifically, to wait for Irma to be brought back to Cornwall.

Griffiths likewise is someone whose life has gone awry: a Welshman, his marriage and career have both turned sour, his child has died of pneumonia, and his wife has deserted him and later committed suicide. He, however, has become militantly anti-Christian, although his agnosticism is 'of the Victorian rather than the modern type' [3] He forms a friendship with Minnie Lagor, the unmarried mother of Shirley who is killed halfway through the book. The relationship founders, however, in good measure because of the effect Griffiths' pessimism has on Minnie, and he is last seen dogged but despairing.

Garth's situation progressively worsens, till finally news reaches him that Irma has 'run wild' and been placed on probation. His dream shattered, Garth virtually breaks up, and his health collapses too through a fever caught while searching for Shirley Lagor. But it is Shirley's mother who brings him relief: in Truro she has seen Irma, who has returned to Cornwall out of a sense that her relationship with Garth was 'the point it all turned on'. [4] So the book's action draws to a close.

(i) Constructing the Arena

Once again, a bald plot summary cannot do justice to the power of the fiction, and in this case may even make the novel sound like a saccharine romantic paperback. But such fiction is utterly alien to a book like *Wilding Graft*, in part because of the intensity of the anguish of the book and in part because of Clemo's ability to evoke the concrete reality of the landscape in which the action is played out. The Cornish clay land setting is the only area Clemo has known, and his use of it is one

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of the great strengths of the book.

The first glimpses the reader receives of it are far from being pristinely pure of metaphor:

His pace slackened perceptibly as the huddled, shapeless white mass of Meledor clay dumps jarred his vision above the frost-thinned scrub of downs... The refuse-heap bulged out as far as the hamlet, but Garth was soon free of it, passing the school standing on a branch road south-west – the school to which he could not honestly say he owed anything – and abreast of the first bare stone cottage of his birthplace. [5]

Thus the opening paragraphs. This is not the Cornwall of romance: there is a sense of discomfort in 'huddled, shapeless', in the refuse-heap that 'bulged out' (echoing the note of the unplanned and indeterminate in 'shapeless'), in the useless school, even perhaps in the bareness of the cottage. The concrete 'thereness' of the objects is conveyed to the reader, but neither we nor Garth are, as it were, 'at home'. Meledor is Garth's home, but the sight 'jarred his vision': and in the verb there is a note of violence, echoed when Clemo writes of 'a thin drizzle ... *driving* across the plateau', and again in the following paragraph:

Meledor was not arranged compactly, but scattered in groups of two or three houses each down the whole length of a long lane. The bends of the road and the thickness of the tree-growths were so pronounced that from none of the cottages was it possible to see many of the others. At several corners one came unexpectedly upon drying-sheds, their low roofs and stacks almost hidden among the trees, and trolley-lines crossed the road, connecting kilns with clay-tanks, the industrial features giving a false impression that the end of the village had been reached. [6]

It is not a paragraph in which anything 'happens', and yet there is the sense of the sharply unexpected running through it. This is a landscape that is not determined by man ('scattered', 'unexpectedly', 'false impression'): an indeterminate universe (as Griffiths will view it) or at least one whose true determinants are not visible to ordinary vision. The sense of movements without discernible shape is an undertone in the paragraphs that follow:

His hands clenched, but the thoughts that would have surged anew at sight of that place were stemmed by a swift distraction. A movement! Something was happening down there.... Along this gulch the clay-clogged Fal oozed turbidly.... Drawing near to it Stribley led the horse in a broad curve until it faced the farmstead, and then backed it towards the fence that guarded the brink of the gorge. The group were soon hidden from Garth's view by a blob of trees on the higher bank. He heard Stribley bawling at the horse, then sounds of confused movement, the creak of the cart and the rattle of the fence, as if some bulky object had bounced against it. [7]

'Clenched', 'surged/stemmed', 'oozed turbidly', Stribley's unclear movements (finally hidden by a shapeless 'blob' of trees), 'confused movement ... as if some bulky object had bounced' (bulky objects only *bounce* under great force) all contain the sense of motion, of action, but of motion with no evident direction. At the same time, 'the clay-clogged Fal' is equally important in tying the landscape into the real world. It must not be a mere phantasmagoria, a clumsily-invoked analogue for attitudes within the characters' minds: it must exist *in itself* before it can have emotional resonance.

The scrubby vegetation, the white muffled clay streams, the dunes and clay-beds glimpsed unexpectedly through snaky boughs and the dimly-seen expanse of Goss Moor below, carrying the desolation to wilder and more savage extremes of tarn, bog and featureless wasteland until jarred six miles north-west by the low grim tors around St.Columb – these details seem united in a common withdrawal from the general tone of English scenery. [8]

Here again are the notes of the indeterminate in 'unexpectedly' and 'snaky'; and the sense of violence in 'jarred'. At the same time the placenames, and the matter-of-fact present tense evoking the tone of the guidebook,

preserve a distance from the dreamscapes of second-rate romanticism. The tarn might indeed be 'wild' and 'savage', and the tors 'grim'; no 'pathetic fallacy' is required. Yet these words are crucial containers of the symbolic content of the passage. At its best, then, the landscape in Clemo's work embodies meaning, rather than being simply labelled. The sense of inhospitality or of estrangement from humanity appears innate rather than imaginary.

And that is the world Clemo wishes to depict as the arena in which grace operates: alien, the home of forces which appear to have no beneficent shape, and indeed can seem – and be – thoroughly destructive. The concreteness of the landscape is significant for another reason: this is a *real* world into which the lightning of divine grace will strike. This is very important, as the whole thrust of the book is that the action of divine grace is historical, is factual. Clemo's deep sense of his native landscape gives to his narrative enhanced power and credibility.

(ii) Evil and the Presence of Grace

This portrayal of the solid, jagged, object-strewn clay landscape is an index of the fictional world of *Wilding Graft* as a whole – vivid, violent, hostile, containing much that is horrific, both in the catastrophes that come upon its ordinary characters, and in the petty cruelty and spite that seem to characterise village life. That the world is a place of much suffering, indeed of violent tragedy, is the 'given' upon which the book is built; and to seek the causes of this in Clemo's own crippling blindness and deafness is hardly illegitimate. But it has a positive consequence for a Christian writer aiming to depict the action of God within the world: instead of the 'problem of suffering' being an awkward item for which some piece of apologetics must be provided somewhere along the way, it is the starting-point from which Clemo's understanding of grace has to develop.

And just as Clemo earths his vision in his perception and delineation of the landscape he knows best, so too he chooses very *local* events as the expression of evil in the world. At times, as Clemo presents page after page of trivial, spiteful village gossip, the reader may wonder whether it is worthy of record (although the authors of, say, *Dubliners*, or *Mrs. Dalloway*, would have had few doubts on the issue). But the choice of subject is itself a deliberate gesture: God is sovereign and concerned with the affairs of minor individuals, and it is into precisely this arena that the power of grace is breaking. Still, the gossip is ubiquitous, and vicious; and conversation – and human relationship generally – take on the form of combat. Garth is visited by his former fiancée, Edith, and his first concern is 'to gain time for any serious duel she might force upon him'. [9] There is deeper wretchedness too. Garth's mother's lunacy and death –

'Twas four year ago I really lost her. There's been nothing left since, the few times I've visited the asylum. She didn't always recognise me. 'Twas a bad case. [10]

– and then the broken relationship between Garth and Edith, the shattering of Garth's reputation, Edith's subsequent failed marriage:

'I sometimes wish it never happened... because I aren't happy with Seth...'

Garth's voice came curtly enough now:

'I don't want to hear any of that cant. You made your choice and ought to be satisfied when you think how it got me cornered.' [11]

''Twas your fault and Stribley's more than Seth's. A weakling like him – he isn't worth hating.' [12]

Seth has his own problems, of course:

A fellow goes it blind when he ties the knot wi' any woman. The very next day something may happen to knock the whole thing flat. Edith never been the same to me since I had me accident – 'shamed to be seen walking wi' me, lame like I are. But how could I know when we married that any such trouble was coming? [13]

Meledor, then, is a place where for the most

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part life ranges along a spectrum from discomfort to tragedy, the prey of unforeseeable events. The war merely universalises the situation and prevents people ignoring the brutal nature of reality:

'Well, anyhow,' she said with a swift evasive look at the banister partly screened by two of Garth's coats hanging from nails in the beam, 'I don't think the war'll last years. It seems to be fizzling out already.'

'You'll find your mistake there. Evil forces bide their time, getting up strength, and then pounce, as they did on me nearly five year ago. The wreckage that's left then takes a lifetime to clear up. All the questions this war'll bring to people I've had weighing on me since 1935 – while they've been doing their damnedest to forget there's any danger.' [14]

Clemo, writing in 1948, is obviously speaking to 'all the questions this war'll bring', when the 'evasive look' no longer serves; and these 'questions' must focus on how one deals with such a situation, how one lives in such a world. [15]

Garth's words in this last quotation provide a partial answer: he is viewing the world through a framework in which there exist 'evil forces' that quite consciously 'bide their time'. The reference to his own affair makes it clear that Hitler is to be regarded as a special case of a more general evil. And if there is any sort of cosmic framework, it makes sense to attempt to know it, or at best to cooperate with it. He tells Edith on the previous page:
They talk o' keeping their chins up, but that's a risky practice when you're standing up to the Almighty. It invites the knock-out. [16]

There is an enigma in Garth's words here, that is permissible at this early stage but which Clemo never quite disposes of: it is not clear to what extent Garth's misfortunes are the work of 'evil forces' or of 'the Almighty'. However, that is an age-old problem that the Christian encounters both in daily experience and in the Bible (as early as the opening of the book of Job, for instance). Anyway, the obscurity here helps to avoid any sense of an over-tidy and hence implausible piece of 'religion' being involved.

This is important, because the introduction of forces on a cosmic level needs all the help it can get to seem realistic in a novel written in 1948. Other factors may be adduced too: there is the simple realism involved in citing the date '1935' in Garth's 'evil forces' speech ('July 1935', in particular, according to the following sentences). There is the fact that – as the reader in 1948 or afterwards knows full well – Garth is right in his main point: the 'evil forces' did indeed take years to combat and the war lasted until 1945. There is the presentation of Garth, no plaster saint, curt, bitter, or (three sentences before the last quotation) 'shamefaced, sullen... fumbling with his cap'. And finally there is the casual – and entirely true-to-life – use of a supernatural framework (of a kind) in the everyday village conversation:
A talent – nothing less, Mr. Spragg, though we may question which Power above had gived it to him. [17]

If he means to marry her 'twill be a surprising turn, yet in some ways a providence. [18]

Amidst such dialogue, Garth's 'religious remarks' can seem merely to be acting consistently in the light of what the average person generally suspects to be true.

Garth's view of the universe is also not presented without humour. In chapter three, Minnie Lagor is in Truro to meet Griffiths, and instead meets several of the novel's other characters, including both Garth and the grandmother of her illegitimate daughter: she asks Garth, '...Must be a stroke o' this destiny you're always talking about?' [21] She in turn saves Garth's sanity when the crisis comes in his own life. Minnie's character is a wise fictional strategy for keeping Garth's faith from seeming a subjective eccentricity.

Garth's faith, then, is represented by Clemo as the outgrowth, or logical extension, of beliefs that everybody knows deep down to be true. This is of course significant for the strategy of the novel as a whole. Clemo is suggesting that

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most people (this is 1948, of course) assent vaguely to the Christian statements about the nature of reality, but few proceed logically to act upon that faith. (Garth's struggle to do so is a fictional analogue to Clemo's own attempt to portray forces which standard Christian belief is supposed to recognise but which few novelists have attempted to depict in action.) Garth's normality is carefully stressed in the section describing his response to the events that took from him his mother, fiancée and reputation:

Garth had reacted normally to those staggering events of 1935 – that is, religiously. Having been reared in this remote area, having at that time never been to church, and having forgotten most of what he learned at school, he was fortunately untouched by the emasculations of the twentieth-century outlook. He was free to feel with full-blooded instinct that an experience that transfigured life must be essentially a religious experience. And when a man was struck by the lightning of destiny, his old love stripped off like dead bark and a new stain of fire burnt along the whole length of his life by a momentary flash amid the density of circumstance – that too was an Act of God. And because it was a spiritual operation it must be creative as well as destructive. Some purpose was behind, discoverable if one kept in contact with spiritual realities. So Garth had felt, and his mystifying behaviour since had been merely the expression of his honesty to that belief. [22]

This passage contains the kernel of the novel. The basic pattern is clear: to respond 'normally' to disaster and tragedy is to respond in faith; and to believe in God at all should be to believe, firstly that God is omniscient and no 'lightning flash' comes as an unforeseeable surprise to Him, and secondly, that if God is involved in these events then there is a purpose at work that is 'creative as well as destructive'. Garth draws out the implications in discussion with Griffiths, in the passage containing the phrase Clemo chose to make the title of the book:

When the little vendetta was over and I'd lost every round – lost my mother and Edith, and lost my character so that no local girls'd look at me, there was nothing I could cherish but the memories that kid'd left me, and nothing for me to do but try and find out the meaning of why she'd come. And that, of course, brought religion into it.... At bottom ... 'tis just an experiment in prayer.... As months passed and I found that girl's coming had worked a revolution in me – my nature changing and opening out as I'd never dreamed possible while Edith was in the picture – well, I began wondering. I thought p'raps Irma'd got a similar shock from it, and that God had got close to us and done a bit o' grafting without our knowing it. I came to feel like that fellow Browning says, that God has a right to graft excellence on wildings how He likes, whether through a church service or a vulgar scandal, at the altar or in the workshop. The result's the only thing that matters; and I've staked my whole life on the belief that that result will come. [23]

In short, he intends to live by, to gamble on, the objective reality of the action of God. This is the book's narrative pattern. But there is another important point here, and that is the striking way in which the power of grace is made concrete by the violence Clemo puts into its description: 'And when a man was struck by the lightning of destiny, his old love stripped off like dead bark and a new stain of fire burnt along the whole length of his life by a momentary flash amid the density of circumstance – that too was an Act of God.'

This fits well with Clemo's assertion that Garth, being 'untouched by the emasculations' of the outlook of his century, is 'free to feel with full-blooded instinct' the divine dimension in what has happened in his life. Such phrasing, combined with the undoubtedly jarring and effective imagery in the sentences quoted, amount to an affirmation that this whole matter is not something 'gentle, meek and mild', but something colossal, something of equivalent power to sexuality or death or agony. The word 'stain' is also significant: Clemo is rejecting the standard religious imagery of purity for images of forces that must be destructive in order to be creative.

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Grace is, then, a force of instantaneous power like lightning that flashes down, searing the 'dead bark' that must be 'stripped off'. And it should be noted that the moment Clemo pinpoints as the occasion when 'the fateful lightning struck down in Meledor workshop' [26] – 'stabbing' functioning much as the earlier 'flash', and 'communion' offering a fruitful ambiguity: it is the point where Garth and Irma first truly experience each other, but also the point at which people stand in the presence of grace. The combination of imagery and context give to Clemo's presentation of grace a real depth and power.

(iii) Three Alternatives

'Lightning' is something which cannot be predicted or summoned, however: and once the 'lightning flash' has come and gone, and Irma returned (apparently permanently) to London, there is nothing left for Garth to do but wait in hope and faith for the operations of grace to become complete. The result may seem a somewhat passive model of faith. But to Clemo a deliberate refraining from action is in certain situations necessary so that the eventual deliverance should be 'all of grace': and he makes Garth speak of 'the unreasonable Christian way o' choosing to stay put and cut away all the worldly helps so that deliverance when it comes'll be the work of destiny'. [27] The same note is clear in the book's epigraph, from Browning:

The great Gardener grafts excellence

That is our secret: go to sleep!

It is not entirely appropriate [29]:and in Wilding Graft Garth muses:

No one could appreciate the absurdity of the position more than he did with his reasoning powers. Irma! Who could expect – ? As if – ! The protests broke as always against something in him deeper than reason. [30]

This setting of Garth's faith against 'reason' (that is, against the probabilities of the situation) is dependent on supernaturalism. Clemo is suggesting that the factors of the fictional situation – Irma's background, her precocious flirtatiousness, the years of silent separation – are such that it is highly improbable Garth will see her again; so that it will take the direct intervention of grace to turn probable sorrow into actual triumph. The action of grace is not allowed to be assimilated into more convenient and less disturbing categories: it is not a matter of the predictable sociological effects of 'churchgoing', nor of merely 'reasonable' actions dressed up in religious language. Grace must be real: there is a deliberate sense of confrontation, of challenge.

This role of confrontation is implicit in much of the book's imagery, giving it a challenging, provocative flavour. Indeed, such is the sense of the violence of grace in the book that the characters might almost be referred to as its victims. Clemo was thoroughly aware of what he was doing. In The Invading Gospel he writes, 'In all my mature writings I have stressed the aspect of disturbance and even of violence, in the impact of grace', the aim being to ensure the presentation of 'the divine conquest of human nature as the supreme reality'. [32] Both writers are reacting against an understanding of the power of God that presents it as merely 'comfortable', an indistinguishable part of the natural, orderly processes of the world, and hence tamed, non-apocalyptic, colourless. Clemo complains about this kind of religion:

The Modernist idea of offering a simple "friendship" instead of a complex redemption was an attempt to by-pass the Atonement, the terrific point of collision between divine justice and human guilt. The element of danger was removed. The predicted Messianic cyclone had arrived as a gentle zephyr. [33]

The embodiment of such an approach in Wilding Graft is Mr Rundle, a decent churchgoer 'with a ruddy clean-shaven face and rather owlish eyes blinking behind horn-rimmed spectacles ... smiling blandly' [34], who encounters the anti-religious Griffiths in Truro museum:

'... As for myself, I get hope for the future when I look deep into what's behind.'

'Pretty sort of hope', retorted Griffiths, 'when even while we're here talking the people of Belgium

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and Holland are being massacred.'

Mr. Rundle rubbed his bald head, his eyes wandering along the wide arch of skylights in the roof.

'The Dutch may be able to do something with their dykes', he said with an air of vague practicality. '... But somehow I feel the danger won't come too close. To look around here and see how peaceful these things lie after all the upheavals the world has known – it helps a man see things in true perspective.' ...

'Well, I'm afraid I don't find the survival of coffins very encouraging', muttered Griffiths.'... And there's the cathedral stuck above it all to commemorate the complete and final triumph of right over wrong two thousand years ago. What humbug!'

Mr. Rundle shifted uneasily and coughed into his hand; he always felt nervous when Griffiths was in this bellicose mood.

'Well, Mr. Griffiths, we can't see eye to eye on every point. As a churchman I must say I get help from the services back at St.George's – a quiet and soothing atmosphere. It strengthens one's ideals, and that's no bad thing.' [35]

This sort of religion, Clemo implies, is true neither to grace nor to nature. It lacks intellectual robustness (hence Rundle's unease in debate), is reducible to vague 'ideals', 'a quiet and soothing atmosphere' and an ungrounded confidence that in the natural course of events things will turn out right. Griffiths, on the other hand, is a realist, all too aware that the natural course of events can end in massacre and tragedy; and the thrust of the novel is that Christian faith must be equally realistic in its insistence that there is no hope without a radical revolution of grace. [36] The 'divine conquest', Clemo suggests, is a force that, far from being a 'quiet and soothing' component in the natural processes of history, is an intruder; but one of even greater power than the evil that Griffiths recognises. Rundle is decisively 'placed' as this power breaks in at the climax of the chapter, when Griffiths discovers that Garth's faith has been justified and Irma has indeed returned to Cornwall:

Griffiths' stunned look had given place to that of a creature at bay, defenceless, uncertain of the concealed forces threatening him. His face was dark with something more desperate than anger... Mr Rundle stared, pale and alarmed, licking his lips helplessly. [37]

Well-meaning religion is simply swept aside; its platitudes are irrelevant among the mighty forces at work in the world. Rundle's attitudes are one possible alternative to Garth's gamble of faith. But the real alternative in Wilding Graft is Griffiths. Like Garth, Griffiths' life has gone awry; but instead of waiting for the purposes of grace he becomes embittered, and militantly anti-Christian. Early on, as we observed, Clemo makes Garth say, 'They talk o' keeping their chins up, but that's a risky practice When you're standing up to the Almighty. It invites the knock-out.' [38] Griffiths does precisely this: he refuses to believe in – or accept – any divine plan. And as the narrative progresses, and it appears that some pattern exists in the events, he refuses to cooperate.

Hence his girlfriend Minnie notes that 'His defiant reaction seemed to be the signal for the piling up of calamities'. [39] Or, in the terms of The Invading Gospel:

The saving truth confronts man as a barbed and fiery opposition, for that alone can rouse the alienated soul to the battle in which it is conquered by grace... At its deepest level Church warfare is a unique battle between divine grace and human "goodness", between God's merciful decision to come to man's rescue and man's innate conviction that he does not need to be rescued. [40]

Griffiths is clinging to self-sufficiency: Garth describes him as 'putting up a stiff fight for the best values he could figure out, only he was determined to trust his own nature to see him through'. [43])

The story swings back and forth between the two: Garth trusting and following the plan, and finally receiving the fulfilment of Desire; Griffiths too, Clemo hints, potentially involved in such a eucatastrophe through his relationship with the admirable Minnie [44], but losing her precisely because of his inability to believe that joy can be anything but a prelude to disillusionment. In a

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novel like Wilding Graft these two characters are not merely proponents of different theories: they are figures standing in contrasting relationships to a third 'character', the presence of grace. And from their differing relationships to grace the action follows.

(iv) Two Problems

Such, then, are the different 'life-stances' that the novel depicts. We must now consider how, and how successfully, Clemo presents the motions of grace. First of all, we must take note of a problem at the level of the plot.

For there is all too much truth in Griffiths' attitude that Garth's venture of faith is unreasonable. The difficulty is not that the sociological probabilities as Clemo presents them make it unlikely that Irma will treat Garth as anything more than a brief and forgotten peccadillo: Clemo's point is that grace runs counter to such probabilities. The difficulty is rather that the reader is shown little or no substantial reason for Garth's assumption that grace will actually operate in this specific manner. Garth reflects that his life has been wrecked, but because there is a God the experience must be meaningful and fruitful; therefore Irma will return, and he should wait for her. The question is how Garth can be so sure that Irma in particular is to be the source of renewal. Clemo speaks of a 'spiritual kinship that seemed arbitrary and cruel' [45], but this would not appear to be enough for Garth to base his life upon, particularly as Irma does not seem to be a Christian at this juncture. Clemo's picture of her is not of someone especially impressive; he remarks in an aside to a description of the promiscuous Jean Blewett:

Of no marked intelligence, she was forced to live on her emotions and let them be prostituted by pagan standards because she had never heard of any others. She had much in common with Irma Stribley. [46]

That grace should snatch up such a person for redemption and transformation is entirely believable; but there is little in Clemo's portrayal to justify Garth's tenacious faith that this is occurring. That of course makes his faith seem all too much like an obsession. A dialogue between Garth and Edith raises this point clearly:

Garth answered tremulously, while fumbling with the newspaper:

'I've seen in these towns what she'd be unless God stepped in.'

'Well, He didn't, that's all; there was other examples too close... You needn't blame God. He has nothing to do with it. It's just your own silliness. You must have been crazy ever to think of marrying her.' [47]

Obviously the possibility that Edith might be right throws doubt on Garth's entire gamble.

And the gamble has a second problem associated with it. Clemo has decided to present grace active in the area of human sexuality; but it is all too easy for God to appear as a means to an end, the end being marriage to Irma. The word for this, of course, is idolatry. It is a real danger; the experiences that set Garth's gamble of faith in motion are experiences of Irma, and we are given little or no hint of his Godward experience to keep the balance. A passage like

...the prophetic image of Irma which had shaped itself in his mind during that tremendous period when night after night he had knelt there upon the turf while the moonlight broke mutely upon the white crags [48]

sounds more like romantic infatuation than spiritual devotion. And this is worse:

It had long been his habit to take the Bible with him when he went out to spend an evening in the solitude of the heath. Sometimes, when there was a bright moon, he had stayed out till midnight, hunched as now upon some deserted dune or squatting on a ridge of the bare downs, drawing from this book the sustenance of his passion for Irma. He had not discarded it now; it still gave his mood, even his stupor, a language. [49]

This is part of a powerfully desolate section; but the priorities seem muddled, and it is strange that Clemo did not notice. Instead of bringing him closer to God, Garth's Bible reading is used first to sustain his passion and then to provide articulation for it.

It is worth noting that by the time Clemo wrote

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The Invading Gospel he was exploring this whole area in ways that could have avoided these problems. He came to see Christian sexuality as a crucial point at which the processes of nature are caught up into the sphere of grace, thereby becoming something entirely new while yet remaining themselves:

Something quite extraordinary, something we can never fully understand in this world, happens to the sex-drive when the whole personality is yielded to the Holy Spirit... When C.T. Studd became engaged to Priscilla Stewart, he wrote to his mother concerning this fiery little missionary: 'I do not love her for her pretty face; I love her for her handsome actions towards the Lord Jesus Christ'... Love a girl physically because of her handsome actions to Christ? The logic of this is a secret of the Christ-centred life....

No two persons can know Christ in exactly the same way, since no two persons have exactly the same temperament or spiritual capacity. The believer's apprehension of his Lord must therefore be completed from without, not from within, and while this need is met in general by the fellowship of the Church, the communion of saints, there are elective affinities within that communion. A Christian man meets a girl whose approach to Christ has some unique kinship with his own. Something distinct about her faith – the yearning on her face or the passion in her voice as she bears witness to it – arrests him and fills him with a great longing to fuse himself with the facet of Christ which she reflects. If the same girl were an atheist her face and voice would never show the spiritual intensity which fascinates him.... This is the sexuality of the New Creation, a direct product of discipleship. [50]

To a non-Christian reader this may seem bizarre, even preposterous, but pause for reflection will make clear that it is a logical enough development of Christian doctrine; and many Christian couples would probably endorse Clemo's description of the complex motivations that united them. The ideas of these sections seem to offer the possibility of a genuine fusion of the erotic and spiritual. It is worth speculating how Clemo could have used such a fusion; by building into the passages describing the passion of Garth and Irma a greater element of a Godward consciousness (which would be perfectly realistic in the courtship of an individual like Garth Joslin), he could have made more credible Garth's subsequent conclusions about their spiritual dimension and the direction of his destiny, and created a more genuine union of Garth's spirituality and sexuality. But this is not really what we find.

(v) Catastrophe and Response

The origins of Garth's venture of faith, then, are problematic. Clemo's touch is somewhat surer in depicting how the pattern develops. He sets out to demonstrate – or build a model of – grace operative in and through and despite actual evil; and to depict a situation in which the eye of faith can – though with great difficulty – see the hand of providence, while the man who 'stands up to the Almighty' sees nothing but indeterminate brutality.

The 'everyday' nature of the book's evil has already been commented on. For example, when Garth's mother hears about his scandal:

As they were going to bed she paused on the stairway, her figure gaunt, shrivelled behind the banisters, her peaked face looking queer, the eyes glaring in the light of the guttering candle she carried.

'Garth,' she said in a hoarse tone, 'do 'ee know what be the best way to git rids o' woonself? I be tempted sometimes.... There's that old rope we hanged our pig with last year, and barrels is full o' rain-water what a body could slip quiet in.' [51]

Such is the situation in which grace must be seen at work: and it is through two specific calamities that the action develops. What Clemo does is to create a context suggesting in advance, before the catastrophe, that events might 'fit', might have some sort of meaningfulness, and then to use that expectation to show just how deep is the darkness in which grace appears. One of Garth's workmates comments that the war's development could cause the claypit's closure, and adds, in Garth's presence:

Garth have just told us he means to stay put and wait for this destiny he've spoke to us of so often. But that don't mean lying around dreaming all your life. It means that when the proper time have come you'm forced to act, even against your own will; and it look as if that time is pretty near for

Garth now. [52]

Garth walks out, but similar thoughts recur. A few pages later we read that his mother's death had presented the matter 'afresh to his mind as a problem'; then come 'the later shock of Bella's news' that Irma's mother has remarried, so there would be no more news of Irma, and (in logical consequence) 'the sense that the time for action in relation to Irma might be now at hand' (since his mother's death and the possible claypit closure had removed the constraints upon him). [53] Something is moving here; but it is not clear what.

The clearest statement of this sense of direction comes when Shirley Lagor goes missing. Garth joins in the search, reflecting that:

the pounce of dramatic possibility had opened up a fresher phase in his thought of Irma. It seemed united with an outer mood of urgency: a large raindrop, cold and wind-driven, stung his ear as if bidding him listen, and as he raised his head the mournful call of a wood pigeon smote up the vale from the copse where he was now going to look for Shirley. Something prophetic in this sudden quest! Just as unexpectedly, ere long, he might pass from thought to action regarding Irma herself. In what way the challenge would come he could not guess – perhaps through some such chance bit of news as had now startled him, perhaps through a direct move of Irma's. [54]

We may feel that the 'pathetic fallacy' is rather too present here, and is obliterating Clemo's cherished distinction between the outworking of the processes of nature and the abrupt incursions of grace. Indeed it is; but not, perhaps, by accident. Garth is presented seeing things in terms of natural, harmonious development, and even the 'pounce of dramatic possibility' is tamed – it merely means that he is walking in the rain looking for Minnie's daughter.

But that sense of harmony is illusory, and Clemo shatters it. When he had gone a few hundred yards, Garth espied a faint branch path that led down to the coppice, skirting a water-wheel. He halted, gazing at the huge structure, nearly thirty feet high, turning in slow, jerky fashion while the milky liquid streamed and splashed from the trough over the top of it, mingling with the rain and streaking the dusk with flying white flakes as of spume. He became almost hypnotised by this mechanical motion set amid the lush and primitive natural growths....

The scene had somehow the quality of a nightmare, a wild unreality.

The wheel might have been Ixion's, the background Hades, for all the relevance they had to the workaday world. The clanking and grinding noises, the whirling spokes, the rush of water, the gliding motion of spiky rods and wooden beams against the trees, only half-visible in the gloom – these things jarred on the nerves while lulling the reasoning faculties into a trance-like stupor....

The end of the horizontal beam supported a wooden box about five feet square, full of boulders. Its edge came within an inch or two of the ground when it lurched forward, rising six feet above the soil when the vertical beam was drawn back. Some overhanging hazel boughs were knocked senselessly about with each tilt and dip of the beams, sprinkling a shower of drops occasionally as they were freed from the entanglement. There was something inexorable, indescribably malignant in this ceaseless rise and fall of the inanimate. [55]

The sheer concreteness of Clemo's depiction, the fact that he knows exactly what he is describing, enables him to build an image of a spiritually alien world that is firmly rooted in reality. For this is, of course, a metaphor; the 'mechanical motion', the 'ceaseless rise and fall of the inanimate' as the water-wheel circles endlessly, contain a sense of 'inexorable' determinism – yet of a determinism that merely guarantees the shapeless, the purposeless, the indeterminate. The 'slow, jerky' movements of 'half-visible' machinery 'clanking... grinding... whirling... gliding' and yet remaining utterly irrelevant to the 'workaday world' (that is, presumably, not having meaning or apparent purpose, knocking the boughs 'senselessly') present again those directionless motions that we noted in the opening descriptions of the book. These are the un-meaning, destructive motions of the world without grace (even the 'lush and primitive natural growths'); a world inherently and deterministically tragic. In a way that is harder to pinpoint, the 'milky liquid' and 'flying white flakes',

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combined with the 'spiky rods', convey a sense of malignance; perhaps because 'milk' should occur in a context of life, a world that is supportive rather than this hard, sharp setting? The machinery likewise seems divorced from any purposeful context. These are things cut off, separated from their raison d'etre.

Garth steps forward and 'chanced upon the key of this oppressive mood':

There on the muddy turf sprawled a blurred form, revealed fully to his view only for the few moments that the box was aloft; but before it descended he had glimpsed the red tint of clothing, the white blob of a face.

In an instant he realised, and stood petrified.

Shirley Lagor was lying there before him, and as the heavy box ground down upon her again he could have no doubt that she was dead. Her figure did not move as the massive bulk crushed into its vitals.

Minutes passed, and like a gigantic hammer the box rose and fell upon the prostrate body. In the copse an owl hooted, and then came the scream of a hawk pouncing upon some hapless little animal. [56]

It is horrible, and powerful. Shirley has been turned into a thing, a part of the mindlessly destructive/destroyed world of nature, 'blurred', 'sprawled', a 'blob'. The horrifying repetitiveness of the motion of the ballast-box under which she has fallen universalises the event, connects with the symbolic force, carried by the malignant motions of the water-wheel in the preceding pages. And the hawk 'pouncing' (the verb used at the opening of the chapter when Garth is wondering what the next development in his history will be) is an effective if slightly obvious supporting image: this is the world of nature, functioning in recurrent, pointless tragedy.

Clemo's very ability to make the scene come sickeningly alive – and the fact that his portrayal of Shirley in earlier chapters has made her attractively vivid – means that he has set himself the uttermost test. Here is the tragedy of nature; where is grace? Clemo's touch is not so sure in this aspect of his presentation. Garth drags Shirley's body free from further mauling; then comes this passage:

Six years ago he had beheld the corpse of his father, wasted almost to a skeleton, hideous, repulsive. The spectacle before him now was so different as to confuse, even reverse his attitude to the mortal stroke. Here was still beauty, freshness. Apart from some blood congealed around the cut on her temple where she had been stunned as she fell. Shirley was unstained in her final sleep... only the staring eyes, the pallor, the rigidity, told of the irretrievable ravage within. [57]

It simply will not do; his 'attitude' is too easily reversed. The whole structure of the book could have been ruined here, in fact, were it not that Clemo's loathing of sentimentality helps him keep a grip on the reality of the situation:

He couldn't bear to leave her here long, exposed, defenceless, with the rain soaking her body, toads and birds likely to find and defile her. [58]

But there is another weak passage at the close of the chapter. Garth summons help, but reaches the body first:

It seemed no longer harsh, but mournful in its dignity and sublime in its triumph, eternally beyond the reach of harm.... It was the hideous potency of the ills she had escaped that now fleered in the soul of Garth and threw over him the pall of an abject melancholy. The terrible menace of the mood of nature, the loneliness, the inhuman gloom – all combined to enforce his surrender.

He sank on his knees beside the dead girl. He looked at her with a sort of agony, hands clasped; and now the tears came, falling one by one upon the remote white face. Words came too, at last, relieving the awful strain. 'Blessed are the dead. Shirley,' he murmured in a choked tone. 'I wish to God that this was Irma and not you!' [59]

'Abject melancholy' makes it plain that Clemo does not approve, and the 'surrender' – overt in the final sentence – is alien to his exuberant determination in The Invading Gospel to 'march on' through tragedy. But that is not what the

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reader notices. It is the falsely romantic 'mournful in its dignity', the 'agony, hands clasped', and the appalling sense of self-indulgence (especially in the closing words). Were it not for the harshness of so much else of the book, to which self-indulgence is alien, Garth as hero could hardly survive this fiasco.

This, then, is ineffective, compared to the starkness of Clemo's presentation of tragedy. But later Clemo begins to offer hints of the possible presence of grace in this event in a more acceptable way. There is a hint in an image he employs in the opening of the following chapter:

Birds kept swooping through the sky that was pale blue with here and there small tufts of white cloud like wads of cotton-wool tossed from some heavenly surgery and floating down to the earth wounded by its long battle with winter. [60]

There is a tactfully-employed suggestion here that there are circumstances where the wound of the 'heavenly surgery' may still turn out – eventually – for good, in some respect. Next comes Garth's remark that 'There was some purpose behind' his being the person to find Shirley, although at that point it seems merely to be the further trial of his faith. [63] – which is harder to accept, unless one concedes the point about an early death not being necessarily evil. But it is tactful enough – four references scattered over a hundred pages suggest, not a preposterously complete 'answer', but hints and tokens that even in this darkness some purpose might still be going ahead.

Something of this is embodied in a single striking image that Clemo inserts, without undue explicitness, when Sal Blewett visits Shirley's grave:

All was in shadow over there, but a waft of sunlight wavered forlornly around the graveyard, slipping across it to stab the roof of the school just below. The church stood a hundred yards to the south: a dark square tower clean-cut among the scabrous frothy outline of trees. From the corner of the cemetery nearest it came the rhythmic thud of a pick, the grating of fallen earth: the sexton digging another grave, Bella supposed. [64]

There is no suggestion here of any 'parable': but this image is Clemo's world. 'All was in shadow' in this universe where nature is 'scabrous', 'frothy', marked by the 'rhythmic thud' of the gravedigger (those repetitive. non-creative motions that are so common in the book) and where all illumination can only 'waver forlornly'. In this universe the 'dark church' stands out as at least 'clean-cut among the scabrous frothy' landscape; a centre of unexplained certainty among the shapeless yet inevitable tragedies.

Here, then, is the first tragedy through which grace must be shown to operate. A second blow follows when Edith visits Garth and is driven by frustration to tell him that Irma has 'run wild' and is on probation; the pure 'Beatrician vision', the Irma of four years' dreams, is in reality being thoroughly promiscuous in London. Garth is broken:

Garth lay back, flagging in exhaustion, stupor clouding his face again for a moment.

'Put on probation because... And I all the while believing... No, damn it. I won't believe it! If God's served me such a trick...'

'You needn't blame God. He has nothing to do with it. It's just your own silliness.' [65]

Here too the picture is clear enough. This world is not a 'quiet, soothing' place; it is a place of apparently broken dreams, of torment and disaster.

In the next three chapters, therefore, Clemo presents three responses to the apocalypse of evil and disillusionment; in the bereaved Minnie, the broken Garth, and Griffiths whose whole worldview of Hardyesque pessimism is a reaction to the tragedy in his own life. Minnie's response is in character:

Minnie's black clothes of mourning shrouded a figure wrenched and warped, the vitality drained from it, though her eyes, scanning Griffiths' twitching face, were brave and trustful, the pale lips forcing a smile weary but with no more of bitterness than they had shown when she last parted from him. [66]

She has recovered from her bereavement sufficiently to sense a new freedom for whatever might come of her meetings with Griffiths. [67] In

the context of the whole book it seems clear that the relationship is a possible means whereby the suffering they have both experienced will be transcended and turned into glory.

Here, however, the very different nature of Griffiths' worldview reveals itself as an obstacle. 'Both of us', he tells Minnie, 'seem singled out for the spite of whatever Power presides over human destinies' [69], and proceeds to raise a deeper issue:

'That's the main trouble between us, Mr. Griffiths... I don't think I could be happy with a man who would keep on believing that everything's meaningless. 'Twould take all the heart out o' me. What's the good of anything I might do, any sacrifice I'd make, if you'd treat it as a accident or fluke, as you just said?'

She paused, shot him a stealthy glance and felt a twinge of pity for him: he looked haggard, tense, staring at some white butterflies that fluttered about the shrubbery.

'And if,' she went on, resolved now to speak her mind fully on this point – 'if some woman came into your life so that looking back you'd see that all the misery was only preparing you for the happiness at last, then if you still say it's without any purpose the experience would die out again. It couldn't live if you wouldn't give it air, and a sensible woman wouldn't try it if you was determined to stifle it like that.

He lifted his face, twitching – a gleam of torture in the deep baffled eyes.

'Honesty can be a bitter thing, Miss Lagor.' [70]

Atheism, Sartre said, is a cruel, long-term business; and this is what Clemo is portraying here. Griffiths is consistent, to the point of seeming (like Garth) an extremist; and as a result he is losing his girl. (This is the last conversation between them that the book records. [72] At the level of verisimilitude we might question whether someone in Griffiths' circumstances would come up with such an attitude. But Clemo is presenting Griffiths as determinedly shunning illusion and evasion, an unusually consistent representative of his creed. Minnie's faith enables her to go on with life expecting the 'joyous turn'; Griffiths' refusal of hope blights the possibility when it is offered.

At that level, the debate might merely seem a matter of which belief is most conducive to a happy existence. Garth's role destroys that, in part because his renunciation of action, his uncompromising determination to wait for deliverance by grace alone, removes any possibility that his faith is merely something that assists human action: and in part because of the painful, indeed destructive, nature of the waiting. Clemo's approach here is more that of the romantic novelist than the strict realist – he is following in the footsteps of Dostoevsky or Emily Bronte, let us say, rather than George Eliot – and the presentation of Garth at the opening of the next chapter is reaching towards the archetypical:

Garth laid down the book on the wooden platform upon which he was sitting, part of the tip framework at the top of a clay-dump behind Meledor. He dropped his head, slumped forward with elbows on his knees, and remained motionless, supported by the rail that guarded the edge of the platform – a grey huddled shape, the only figure visible in the wide waste of the plateau, and a fit match for its desolation. [73]

One is reminded of the huge, devastated figures – Michael, the Leech Gatherer – that appear in equally barren landscapes in Wordsworth's poetry.

His actions were mechanical, slovenly; he ate little and kept no regular meal-times. Even now, though it was Sunday, he had not thought of putting on his best clothes, but wore his ordinary clayey corduroy trousers and ragged black coat, without a collar or tie. [74]

As in the preceding scene with Minnie and Griffiths, Clemo does not articulate what is happening in precise theological terms at this point, but the shape is clear. Edith's news has crippled Garth's faith in the working of grace; he is now living out the slow, disintegrative ('mechanical, slovenly') process of unredeemed nature. He wonders, for example, if Edith's report of Irma may be false, but:

the effort to persuade himself of this soon collapsed now that he had no faith to support him against conclusions which he had always known to be natural. [75]

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'Natural', of course, is the key word, although Clemo does not emphasise it; the question is whether there is hope outside the natural. Clemo presents one token only that in these circumstances grace may still be at work in Garth's circumstances:

Yet there was still a nerve in Garth that resisted the final paralysis, one fact in which he found encouragement. Sal Blewett!
Why had she come at that crucial hour, when Edith, having weakened him by her news, was bent on conquest? She had leaned over the bed to kiss him just as Sal's knock sounded. Had there been no interruption – who knew what he might now have had on his conscience? He'd certainly felt very queer and unbalanced – might have strangled her, or even, if the touch of her lips whetted his starved senses – ! And instead – that abrupt turn, breaking the temptation.... Sal's coming had saved him from taking some irrevocable step into the dark. But why, if Irma was not to be his? [76]

Here again the suggestion is of grace obscurely active through evil: Sal is a disreputable character, and her interruption of Edith's assault involves her only good deed in the book. Still, Garth himself is being presented in a state of defeat, and 'change... exhaustion, decay.... Flamboyant hope passing to purple shame and grey misery' [77] is all he can see at this point. When Edith's husband appears, Garth's mood is truculent, even vicious:

Seth shrugged.

'I don't want to fight', he mumbled. 'Nothing between us that need be settled in that way.'

'Oh! I thought there was.' Garth's voice taunted now openly, his face was dark, with ugly lines playing about it, breaking up the dazed surface. 'Men usually get a bit wild when their wives start kicking loose after other fellows.' [78]

It is effective that it should be so: Garth is thereby made a far more plausible hero than if he were an unmitigated saint. At the same time, the book hints in subtle ways that the drama is still in progress. For an appropriate metaphor, Clemo resorts again to the claypit machinery among which Garth speaks with Seth:

The two men faced each other, dwarfed by the beams of the tip, rising twenty feet on either side of the waggon-track, a cross-bar at the summit completing the gallows-like structure. Viewed from below, there was something fantastic in the sight of that pair, tiny and trivial figures, subtly antagonistic, framed up there on the pyramid's point against the sunset sky. [79]

'Trivial figures', 'dwarfed' in some huge but hidden ('subtly antagonistic') pattern: it is a picture redolent of death, with its 'gallows-like structure' completed by a 'cross-bar'. Yet a 'gallows-like structure' is still a structure, something very different from indeterminate disintegration; the note of repetitive meaninglessness is absent, and where there is a structure there may well be some sort of plan. Perhaps too it is possible to see in the 'cross-bar' that is 'completing the ... structure' a hint that the pattern may be redemptive, without involving Clemo in a charge of heavy-handed portentousness: it is not highlighted as a major interpretative image, yet in the tableau-like context of a picture 'framed up there' it has its own implications.

The chapter closes similarly. There is a moment of sheer despair:

Leaning against the window-frame he let the waves of despair sway in, one with the darkening tide of twilight that had washed all colour from the clouds and fronted him, even in the west, with sullen grey.
Minutes passed, while from the surrounding trees and the heath beyond birds flung into song the ache of the spring night, soft for them with mating bliss. [80]

The disjunction is sharply effective: the birdsong offers no comfort, is become meaningless, contingent, in a world where sudden events have like the twilight 'washed all colour' away (the choice of verb is excellent). Garth articulates his feelings through the language of the book of Job:

He breaketh down, and it cannot be built again: He shutteth up a man, and there can be no opening.... Where is now my hope? As for my hope, who shall see it? [81]

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But here is the potency of the novel form: for the very use of quotations from Job to verbalise Garth's overwhelming despair is, in the novel as a whole, a pointer of hope. Job's faith in God's justice, his yearning for answers to his questions, was rewarded: the terms in which the questions are phrased assume a God. If 'He breaketh down, and it cannot be built again', still God is at work: and that – as with the 'gallows-like structure' seven pages earlier – is different from a universe where there is no significance or meaning at all.

Clemo's presentation of the twofold tragedy and of Garth's despair is effective; and he also succeeds in hinting that a supernaturalistic pattern is still at work on its inconceivable purposes.

(vi) Eucatastrophe

It is in keeping with the whole purpose of the novel, presenting grace at work in the everyday, that it should be the mundane Minnie who sets in motion the events of the eucatastrophe. She sees the apparently reformed Irma in Truro and goes to the trouble of bringing the news to Garth, at the same time providing an interpretation for what has happened to them both:

'I really believe you're going to marry Irma. I've felt so very strong since Shirley died. I felt you've paid too big a price to miss your reward.'

Garth's hand dropped to the Bible in his pocket; his face had lit up, become beautiful.

'Can it be that this – Edith's stab – was just the final test? If it is... My God! I can hardly believe... I can only wish you an equal deliverance, Minnie.'

... 'I think mine'll come,' she said. 'But I'm getting less and less sure that it'll be through Griffiths.' [82]

Something is out of control in 'His face had lit up, become beautiful'; and indeed there is an over-intensity in the presentation of Garth throughout this chapter and the next:

His head jerked round, his arms dropped limply; she saw him sway and then stand glaring at her in a blank stupor for a full minute. At last he found his voice – dull, unnatural[83]

As Colly watched the young man half turned, wafting kisses out along the sky, then remained with both arms stretched in vehement yearning towards Truro. [84]

'Gone too far at last, my sonny... There's the makings of Bodmin' (the lunatic asylum) 'in that spectacle', Colly comments later [86] That self-awareness (and the guarantee of the author's detachment from his character that it represents) puts into safer perspective a potentially damaging uncertainty: for while we are unsure whether Garth might not be crazy indeed – or, even worse, whether Clemo might not be presenting insanity without recognising it – then Garth's venture of faith (or Clemo's belief in it) can begin to appear a piece of subjective crankiness. It is therefore important that Garth's deliverance is brought about by the stolid, down-to-earth Minnie, and that it is she, rather than Garth, who makes the major statements of faith in the outworking of the pattern in that chapter. Certainly Clemo is writing in a thoroughly respectable tradition when he presents his hero almost breaking up mentally under the strain of the lonely venture. But when it comes to Garth blowing kisses along the skyline, Clemo has overdone it – for this reader, at any rate.

But there is a worse error here. Minnie arrives at Garth's workshop, and sees:

the blurred figure slumped by the window-frame. His face was hidden in his coat sleeve as he supported himself with an arm against the wall. He did not hear her approach, and she stopped, hesitant, feeling something of awe at that revelation of tragic depth. Such mute despair she had never before witnessed, though she had felt something of it when the news of Shirley's death was brought to her. Garth remained quite motionless. [87]

This is overwritten, and very hard to accept. Minnie has lost a daughter; Garth has only lost a dream of a potential wife. One could say, perhaps, that Garth's reason for living has been taken away, along with his faith in God; but even so, the comparison with Minnie's bereavement is unacceptable. There is too much indulgence in the presentation of Garth: Shirley's death cannot

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be brushed aside in this way. So to assert the overwhelming importance of a novel's central character is to assert the unimportance of the supposed feelings and sufferings of the other characters, and therefore the unreality of the fictional world they live in.

Still, the fruition is now underway, and the writing is better when Clemo narrates Griffiths' discovery that this is the case:

It was as if he felt the approach of an unveiling, a touch of irony that would reveal him and Garth, not as mere champions of opposing creeds, but as figures placed in deadly juxtaposition in the same act of destiny.

The first practical hint of that ambush came sooner than he could have expected, and from an unlooked-for quarter.

The stillness overhead was snapped suddenly by an uncertain, almost stealthy footstep that echoed on the stone floor. [88]

The breaking of the (as it were) theological stillness simultaneously with the very literal 'stillness overhead' is effective.

Griffiths' stunned look had given place to that of a creature at bay, defenceless, uncertain of the concealed forces threatening him. His face was dark with something more desperate than anger. [89]

In 'ambush', 'at bay', 'concealed forces threatening', there is again the sense of the violence, the alien otherness, of the presence of grace. Even Irma experiences this when she hears Garth's name mentioned:

Griffiths noted the rigidity of her pose, an intent watchfulness as of one startled, holding shut with all her strength some spiritual door from which the main bolt had slipped. [90]

Again, the sense is of grace as a powerful physical force, something threatening to burst a door open; by no means a cloudy abstraction, and very far from 'gentle, meek and mild'.

At this point Clemo faces the task of presenting the experience of eucatastrophe, making his reader experience just what it is to see the revelation of desire fulfilled, the final coming of what was longed for after the long agony of delay. For if Irma is the embodiment, to Garth, of desire fulfilled, she must seem so to the reader as well. But she is not one of the the book's best characterisations:

' [91]

This background of radiance gave a strange vividness to her slim tall figure; it surrounded her like a halo, almost etherealized the lonely mould of youth, mystery and passion that were combined in her. [92]

Yuk; Irma cannot be canonised in this way. It is only tolerable because it comes directly after the paragraph just quoted on the 'stealthy footstep': Irma is the localised sign of the presence of grace that has been so effectively presented in its 'stealth', and because of that she can safely shrink into a symbol for a paragraph or so.

The final reunion between Garth and Irma is better managed, however. It gets off to an inauspicious beginning when Irma catches sight of Garth and follows him ('This was no "date" with a boy friend! Destiny!' [93]). But Clemo's sense of physical presence salvages the situation when they enter the cathedral:

A hazy gloom brooded over the great nave, a few shafts of sunlight wavering up among the white arches. The stained glass windows broke up the spilth of beams, toned them to unearthly hues, remote, gentle, floating out like aureoles over the carved symbols of worship. No one visible up towards the north transept. That part of the building was still unknown to her: the place had seemed so big that she hadn't ventured far beyond the west entrance for fear of getting lost.

She moved noiselessly out across the nave, holding her breath, treading stealthily as though she had come on some sacrilegious mission. Her eyes glided about, darting into every niche and among the rows of chairs and the pillars, where a blacker bulk might break the smooth flow of twilight. [94]

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The sense of size and of silence – and yet of gentleness – provide, suddenly, a context: at the same time 'a blacker bulk' is in tune with the earlier presentation of the darkness of grace that alone can bring this fulfilment of desire. There is an interplay between 'sacrilegious' and the sentence that closes the paragraph:

Passing free of a pillar that had obscured a full view of the chancel she saw it as the place where the great moment of recognition was fated to strike – fitly, since the life they sought to consummate had been nourished by the truths acknowledged there.
Garth was standing within a few yards of the altar, near the row of chairs... [95]

This is spelled out rather too clearly, but the paradox is effective. This is eucatastrophe, 'all is well' now; and yet grace is something with which human beings should never feel merely – complacently – 'comfortable', and the earlier 'sacrilegious' preserves an essential element of audacity, of awe, even of fear. At any rate, the encounter is not merely contingent; it is set within a pattern, a meaningful drama taking place on a stage (like Garth and Seth at the time of Garth's despair, 'framed up there on the pyramid's point' [96]):

She still kept a sharp look-out for intruders. All remained calm, like a stage purposely set for her and Garth...

...Her instinct was driven into passionate certainty of what was meant by that figure so absorbed, broken and careless who should see his last agonised appeal for guidance and succour... This feeling burnt from her every trace of reserve, misgiving , apprehension; it gave her strength, the knowledge of her power over him and of a higher Power claiming them both. She ascended the side steps of the chancel, with her gaze lifted to the figure of Christ carved in the centre of the reredos, gleaming gold. His hands outstretched behind the altar – grafting hands....

Tip-toeing in on to the paved floor she touched Garth's arm and said in a gulpy tone, very different from her gay challenge of that earlier day:

'Garth! I've come!' [97]

Much depends here on paradox, a paradox that is within Irma herself (thereby making her, at last, come alive). On the one hand she is conscious of her unchallengeable power over Garth, expressed in her situation as the observer watching him passionately at prayer. On the other, she is conscious of the watching 'higher Power claiming them both', the violent focus of grace that has been 'grafting' and has 'burnt' throughout the novel: something emphatically solid, a figure 'carved ... gleaming gold'. Likewise there is the fundamental, paradox of grace itself: overwhelming power, 'gleaming gold', yet functioning in people who must go 'tip-toeing in' and speaking 'in a gulpy tone', or who are – notwithstanding Garth's fortitude – 'absorbed, broken and careless'. Both Irma's character and the presence of grace attain verisimilitude through complexity; the fusion is successful and grace is palpably present at the moment of human eucatastrophe.

The fusion is hard to hold: before Garth's 'gaze swept back to her, burning, avid to feast on every feature', he 'looked up at the reredos – a beautiful look, groping towards adoration' [100] Precisely this is easy to follow with Garth's summary of the providential aspect:
'God knows what I've been through since we met last. It's like a dream – so much off the common lines. This last month or so I knew I was in sight o' the end – some sort o' end. The enemy came in like a flood and it seemed the foundations must give way. But God stood by me, gave me the hint in time... I've been here three times this week, and felt last night that I must find you today or else....' He shrugged, staring at the red altar frontal, the flowers above it. [101]

Garth's overwroughtness is still present; but precisely because of this, the firmness of his statement (eg. the biblical 'the enemy came in like a flood') is credible. But Irma is present too – present to the reader as well, this time – to emphasise that what he is talking about is reality. He is nearly broken, but he is correct in what he is saying; the overwroughtness is the mark of a real conflict, not a sign of the onset of insanity. This is the shape of eucatastrophe.

(vii) After Eucatastrophe

A further challenge faces Clemo immediately: now he must show how life goes on after the apocalypse of grace. This is a challenge that the Christian fantasists – Tolkien in The Lord of The Rings, Lewis in Till We Have Faces or That Hideous Strength – are not perhaps under so great pressure to handle: after the apocalypse Frodo dwindles away, Orual dies, Ransom the Pendragon returns to Perelandra. But in real life the hero and heroine do not simply ride off into the sunset; and a biblical realism such as Clemo has sought to build upon must reckon with that.

This is why it is important that Garth's overwrought state does not vanish overnight [102], and that there should still be questions such as where they are to live:

'I might be sent to Devonport or Bristol instead – if I'm lucky enough to escape active service; and you'd want to come with me, in digs up there.'

Irma rose, frowning moodily back at the stairway.

'It's real enough, Garth – this miracle of ours: there's still so many things we could worry about.' [103]

Faith has to be shown to have some relevance in these 'things' now that the main 'gamble' is over. Irma's description of how she is virtually assaulted by Griffiths contains a phrase that tactfully suggests an entire attitude at work:
I was just strolling up and down there, thinking of our meeting and wondering how things would open for us to get married. [104]

'How things would open': here is embodied a whole outlook of faith in an ongoing plan, and in a power that in its own good time can bring the plan into reality.

An equally important element at this stage is the quality of eroticism in Clemo's descriptions of Garth and Irma together, which provides an essential realism to the fruition of Garth's covenant with grace (a realism lacking in the passages concerned with Irma alone), and also asserts that grace is still present (rather than disappearing after the climax in the cathedral). Some of these passages have a sense of earthiness reminiscent of Lawrence:

He was in his workaday, clay-smeared trousers, stripped to his shirt above the waist, and had obviously been shaving when she knocked: half his face was white with lather and he still held a safety razor in his hand... 'You've caught me this time – and you'll have to wait till I finish my shave before you get what you've come for!' [105]

But this does not stop Clemo setting a spiritual context for their passion:
Garth hastily completed his shave, wiping his face with a towel hung behind the door. Then he drew her back in front of the dresser, and for several minutes they stood there embraced, very still, her lips drawing at his mouth as if it were the one duct of nourishment God had opened to her soul just then. [106]

Through an unobtrusive simile Clemo introduces the idea of God the Creator, naturally interwoven with, and a natural context for, what is taking place between Garth and Irma. And there are other ways too of establishing grace as the context of their sexuality:
She was ready. Their kiss was swift, lips locked to lips for only a few seconds, but it brought them fully through to realisation, the perfectly natural sense of mateship begun so long ago, maturing in darkness and silence, budding out now with delicious, frank audacity. [107]

In the 'sense of mateship' there is presented a pattern to which their love belongs; although the word 'natural' must evidently now be understood as meaning 'fitting', rather than 'pertaining to the sphere of nature rather than grace', as earlier in the book. The image of darkness reappears, and even the note of violence is present in 'budding out now with delicious, frank audacity', but transformed by the adjective 'delicious' and by the connotations of fertility. Or again:

She glanced at the drawn curtain barring out the dying daylight from the room, making a shadowy world all round.

'Yes. Good night, Garth – till then!'
He knew what she meant, and as soon as he was alone he knelt beside the camp bed for a long

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while, his head bowed, praying earnestly. [108]

The erotic and the spiritual are brought naturally together as part of the same created world, freely compatible concerns of the same minds: there is not the sense of something furtive and guilt-ridden that one feels when sexuality and spirituality meet in some of Greene's writing, for example. It is precisely the fusion that was missing earlier in the book, when it was needed to justify the specific direction of Garth's venture of faith: it presents Garth as 'priest and lover'.

But a third point is worth making about Clemo's treatment of the post-apocalypse phase. The sense that grace operates through the very midst of evil does not disappear now that the fruition has come: the evil is not simply brushed away. In fact Clemo chooses the moment of the reunion to emphasise it, as Irma tells Garth how her father died:

'He ... he got struck on a woman, early last year – went to live with her. They took lodgings in Dulwich. I didn't see dad for two months or more. And then – one day they... they was found gassed in their bedroom.'

'Gassed?'

'Yes. A suicide pact. They'd burnt themselves out, I s'pose, and couldn't face it.' [109]

Garth reacts with horror, 'No wonder God plagued me with prayer for you' – not the usual way of speaking about prayer, but in keeping with what Irma has just said. And realistic too (any Christian knows the experience of finding a real labour in prayer feeling like a real burden); yet it contains the basic paradox of the book's theology of the alienness of grace: prayer can seem a 'plague'. The fruition of Garth's dream has not altered the facts of existence.

(viii) The Rejection of Grace

The woman in the suicide pact is in fact Griffiths' wife. This seems something of an unnecessary coincidence. But the point Clemo is trying to make is clear: the evil is there anyway, and the issue is how we handle it. For Irma, the suicide is 'what pulled me up'. [110] For Griffiths, in contrast, the experience had precisely the opposite effect, as Garth tells Irma:

'Minnie blabbed a bit about me, as neighbours will, and he called to try and make me "expect only the worst and accept it in silence", as his experience – that tragedy about his wife – had convinced him there wasn't any God.'

A look of wonder held Irma's eyes very wide and steady.

'And that same experience – how strange! It was that very thing that led me to find my feet and ... and reward your faith.' [111]

These remarks are a summary of the book's action. And in the midst of Irma's eucatastrophe they raise the issue of how Clemo would have us regard those who – for whatever reason – do not end up participating in grace.

He deals with this issue in the closing chapters, the last of which is perhaps the best in the whole novel. The starting-point is the discussion of the Dulwich suicide, and the differing effects it has had on Irma and Griffiths. Garth makes a comment which at first sight seems deliberately offensive: 'Yes; God seems to have been thinking of us rather than him.' But Clemo does not leave it there. Garth continues:

I can't explain – it's too vast, too deep, the puzzle of things. But there are facts enough to show that the way of faith is the right way, and doubt and cynicism and bitterness warn God off a man's life so that it crumbles to disaster. [112]

There is a comparable passage in The Invading Gospel that could have stood as an epigraph to Wilding Graft:

The essence of the Christian Gospel lies in its proclamation to the individual: 'Your fate is unspeakably tragic, but you need not fulfil it. Surrender the self that would fulfil that fate and the fate itself collapses. You become a new creature with a new destiny.' [113]

Griffiths is a fictional model of the rejection of this proclamation. Both he and Garth show every sign of being trapped in the deterministic processes of natural tragedy, and both are offered escape

through grace. But where Garth chooses the 'way of faith' and so escapes his destiny, Griffiths' refusal to 'surrender the self that would fulfil' his fate forces him to attitudes which as Garth says, 'warn God off a man's life so that it crumbles to disaster'.

His position – outside God's redemptive covenant purposes, left to the outworking of natural tragedy – is the result of a deliberately-adopted stance.

Griffiths' reaction to the discovery of Irma's return is the overwrought eccentricity to which Clemo's characters seem prone. [114] But when the final chapter opens, he has recovered self-awareness and realises that he will be psychologically incapable of enduring Cornwall under the circumstances. But before leaving Cornwall, he seeks to get some perspective on his position, and in the attempt at reflection emerges clearly as a Clemo-surrogate, like Garth himself:

He shrank instinctively from the lush natural landscape lying towards Falmouth: now in the full riot of May its soft beauties would be maddeningly incongruous. His mood was one for the desert, a stripped barren expanse suggesting the ultimate conflicts. And he realised through an imaginative, poetic nerve still keen at times amid the general cloudy flux, the fitness of the clay area as a setting for his desperate spiritual battle. [115]

Of course this means that Griffiths stands, not as a representative of all agnostics, but rather of all passionate, poetically-minded agnostics capable of conceiving 'desperate spiritual battles': the clash between Garth and Griffiths is here not quite a clash of worldviews, but rather a clash between the kind of Christian faith Clemo himself holds and the kind of atheism he might be attracted by. But once again, the concreteness of the landscape prevents the drift into a mere drama of internal, mental phenomena:

He descended a step-ladder from the embankment and moved past the workshops to the pit-edge, where the path broke away into a flight of rough steps leading down into the "bottoms" which he would have to cross to reach the sand-dune... The steps were cut in the gravel soil of the cliff, but the shape of each was preserved by a board set vertically in front of it, secured by iron spikes... Several times he halted and leaned over the bar, peering gloomily down the cliff-side that was matted with coarse knots of fern, hazel and broom bushes. [116]

As at the book's opening, it is because the landscape is so well known to and/or well-imagined by Clemo, and so clearly presented to the reader along with its inherent barrenness and hostility to life, that it can serve as a metaphor for spiritual conditions and yet remain more than a metaphor.

He could stroll out along that flat broad pile, which in itself seemed to be stiffened in defiance to the dunes of Meledor across the valley, and there decide upon his active defiance, some retaliation. [117]

The landscape is being used to enforce the dominant image of the book, of a violent conflict involving colossal spiritual forces – forces perhaps whose shape is not clear – in which Griffiths is by now a battered combatant:

It seemed to Griffiths that his moves in Cornwall had brought him into an ambush of fate, the denouement of apparently random friendships baring maliciously, and ripping open afresh, the old wounds he had hidden... He felt that his whole life was drained out by it, the long attrition complete. [118]

And here Clemo's vision comes into its own; the reality of the conflict has been plain throughout the book, with the whole weight of its violent imagery and action behind it. And where there is a combat, there must be more than one combatant. The existence of a real, invasive force against which Griffiths has been struggling thus becomes finally credible, as does his cool, unemotional acknowledgement of the fact:

His personal animosity towards Garth had ebbed and flowed with his moods; but it was diminishing. As he surveyed Garth's home now from the bridge his hatred of the man seemed trivial, misplaced. He saw that it was useless blaming Garth; the fellow had done him no conscious wrong. After all, Garth himself had chosen Edith and expected to settle down to a quiet domestic life that interfered with nobody. It was not Garth who had chosen that the girl who pressed her virginity to him in Meledor workshop should be Irma Stribley; nor had he willed the death of

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Shirley Lagor. Behind these decisive events there was a Mood – the Mood of which Garth had spoken during their talk in his cottage last Easter. To Griffiths it was still impersonal; he would not admit that it was a God in the Christian sense. But he was compelled to acknowledge that there was a mysterious force in the universe with which human faith could be allied. It was what he had always been up against. And he was oppressed by a feeling that this last wreckage it had brought upon him was too complete to be repaired. It was not a new, separate blasting from which he could recover to grapple with the next elsewhere. [119]

In one sense this passage is the climax of the book's pattern: the whole force of what Clemo has sought to do leads to this moment at which Griffiths quietly surveys his life and concludes that there is a 'force' at work. And the ubiquitous violent images are still there; grace acts through 'wreckage', through 'blasting', through a girl who 'pressed her virginity to' a man expecting a 'quiet domestic life that interfered with nobody', but whose choice has been drastically cancelled. Clemo is not writing a systematic theology, and the doctrinal particulars belong elsewhere: it is this moment of recognition or concession of vast powers pounding their way into the events of everyday life that he has been working to produce.

But by his refusal of God, Griffiths has closed himself off from any mode of relationship to these titanic forces except confrontation. At the same time, Clemo is using Griffiths to demonstrate that the acknowledgement of the reality of a God – or something similar – does not compel submission. Nor is Griffiths simply being held up as an exemplum, a horrid example of impenitence: there is something close to genuine tragedy here, a real strength in Griffiths and a real sorrow in the writing. The 'point of view' contributes a little; the reader has been made to see through Griffiths' eyes, and indeed when Garth appears he is seen from the outside, 'much agitated... his hair clotted with sweat and falling untidily over his narrowed, feverish eyes'. [120] The reader watches from Griffiths' position and hence experiences, 'sees', just what it is to know of the powers of the heavens to be at work, and yet, consciously and deliberately, to refuse, to reject. It is the utter reality of that choice that Clemo wishes to convey.

But the conflict is not merely something of the past, to be contemplated from a safe intellectual distance. Griffiths has heart trouble and collapses in the claypit; it is the National Day of Prayer and so the unchurched Garth is one of the only possible rescuers. Clemo thus arranges his final confrontation with far less of a forced coincidence than earlier in the book:

Griffiths stood up, his hand clawing at the iron body of the waggon.

He was still weak and a further shadow of pain clouded his face for a moment, leaving an ugly mark of cynicism in the twist of the lips.

'Our creeds have worked themselves out now with a vengeance, haven't they, Joslin?' he taunted. 'Just like my fate that – so near the end – I should see what faith can do – in the family that confirmed my scepticism – Stribley's daughter. And that your part of it should turn Miss Lagor...'

'I didn't mean to turn her against you,' muttered Garth.

'I admit it... But when her child died she turned to the faith in you, and that worked again to thwart me And now – this farewell glimpse – as I meant it to be – of this cursed landscape – and you're brought before me again.' [121]

It is an effective, unforced exposition (if one allows that Griffiths – like Clemo's other characters – is inclined to give audible vent to his feelings).

Indeed, Clemo could have dispensed with one or two similar passages of clarification earlier on, since this was still to come. The book's events are no longer opaque: Griffiths' exposition is entirely compatible with Irma's in its awareness of their significance. Yet there remains a distinction: the irony of Irma Stribley and Minnie Lagor both finding faith in a situation of evil is to Irma the divine irony of grace, but to Griffiths the twists of a Hardyesque fate. The point Clemo is making is that both Griffiths and Irma correctly recognise a pattern, but where Irma has submitted to and seen the glory of the action of grace, Griffiths has rejected it and so is left only with a 'cursed landscape' – a deft use of an everyday phrase, for in Clemo's theology the landscape is indeed 'cursed' as a result of the Fall, in the outworkings

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of which Griffiths remains trapped.

Yet even here the suggestion is that Griffiths' fate is not sealed. There is an ambiguous possibility of significance in this final encounter with Garth; perhaps it is 'just like my fate' that that last humiliation should occur – or again, a last encounter forcing Griffiths to this degree of self-awareness could equally well be 'just like' grace. But Griffiths' rejection has the upper hand: that he should see 'what faith can do' is not a motivation to repentance, but rather is 'just like my fate'. The pattern is complete; tragically.

The last glimpse we have of Garth is not exactly as hero. Griffiths declares 'doggedly' that he is leaving Cornwall (the adverb saves his speech from self-indulgent heroics):

'My heart wouldn't stand an air-raid, so perhaps it may as well be London.'

Garth shrugged.

'It's your own life,' he commented. 'No business o' mine, however much you may try to drag me into it.' [122]

This is the unloving side of Garth's nature. [123] But it is a fine choice for his last speech in the book. That Garth's own moral development should still have so far to go prevents the development of a simple antithesis of saint and sinner. Secondly, the speech emphasises – without overt preaching – Griffiths' freedom of choice, even in a universe where omnipotent grace is at work.

'I'm not blaming you – I've outgrown that. It's what you stand for.' Griffiths braced himself and stepped forward, his eyes brooding out over the countryside drowsed in its Sunday calm: no sound or activity on the clayworks but those of the birds and the running water in the conduits.... He turned back to Garth with sober, hostile deliberation.

'The churches are full this morning, Joslin – superstitious crowds pretending to faith. But you – you've got some damned secret they'll never touch – you and your God. And it's broken me. Perhaps before many months it'll have finished off the jest and left me – as my wife is, or Shirley Lagor...

'...So be it. We've both paid the price... and you've won, Joslin.'
He threw a last defiant glance across the dale at the ridged skyline of Meledor, then, waving Garth and Chirgwin aside, he moved slowly towards the embankment, a hand pressed over his heart. [124]

So the book ends: with a final evocation of the violent otherness, so unlike the tameness of the churches, of the grace that is invading this world, grafting the life of the eternal world into 'wildings' that naturally would resist it. The confrontation is raw: Griffiths is soberly 'hostile' to the 'damned secret' that has 'broken' him in the course of its 'jest'. The violence and the presence of death are there till the end. Griffiths is still the focus of the narrative, so that as he walks away, 'a hand pressed over his heart', something is conveyed of the reality and conscious cost of his choice of defiance. And perhaps the last sight the reader has of Garth embodies something of the grace he 'stands for': seen from the outside, silent, not (necessarily) 'friendly'; something that cannot be ignored although it can be 'waved aside', defied. It is an effective ending, with the book's two protagonists in harsh, almost archetypal, juxtaposition.

Such, then, is Wilding Graft; a book with very considerable flaws, but one which has attempted to depict the workings of grace in human affairs in a way attempted by hardly any other novelist this century. The result is a novel that in places achieves a stark power. Clemo's ability to depict his native Cornish landscape and to use it as metaphor for spiritual conflict; his evocation of evil and of the violence and alienness of grace that distances him far from milk-and-water piety; and his compulsive vision of that power of grace pouncing and grafting, and man submitting or defying, have produced a book which, though far from perfect, is still an unusual achievement.

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[124] Ibid, p.294.

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